

THE NOTION OF ETHICAL LIFE. Ethical life is defined, first, as the concept of freedom developed into (literal German: ‘that has become’) the existing (external) world. This means: ethical life is a manifestation, actualisation of freedom, that is, of human morality. Here ethical life is identified as a set of social institutions determining moral behaviour in concrete terms, such as family, Church, or various state institutions. 142

Secondly, ethical life is also the concept of freedom developed into the nature of self-consciousness. Paraphrase: the ethical outlook of any particular individual is also determined by ethical life. Which attitudes he takes toward social life, its institutions and duties, or toward other individuals—all of this is determined by ethical life.

Remark 1. In Hegel’s philosophical inventory, ‘Idea’ is ‘concept actualised.’

Ethical life is thus stable, far more so than any subjective opinion or whim, and presumably, also conscience. He quotes Sophocles to the effect that laws and institutions are ‘eternal’. The claim is striking and surprising. It is not an abstract moral law (or an abstract law of nature, as in Hobbes) that is eternal. It is rather the concrete laws and institutions that are such. 144 144A

This point is taken up again when the ethical law and its objects are declared to be more ‘firmly established’ than natural ones. Here is one gloss: Events of the natural world exist (they ‘are’), but they often appear contingent. Certainly their necessity, their lawlike behaviour is not required for self-consciousness. It is only required occasionally, in some of my dealings with natural objects. But the lawlike behaviour of the social world is required for self-consciousness. I can only understand myself as part of social life. 146 146R, 147

PHILOSOPHICAL ETHICS. A proper philosophical investigation into ethics can only be in connection with the duties set by the particular form of ethical life. Hegel is apparently dismissive of ‘intuitive ethics’ where duties are investigated in connection to common beliefs and feelings of particular individuals. 148 148R

AFFIRMATIVE FREEDOM. Duty sets you free. For in following the duties prescribed by ethical life you are liberated, on one hand, from determinations of impulses, urges, and inclinations, and on the other, from the ‘negative freedom’ of subjectivity that oscillates and vacillates, without coming to any stable resolution (see Handout 13). 149

VIRTUE AND DUTY. Hegel’s definition of virtue rings an Aristotelian tune: virtue is a property of character when that character is determined by nature. Rectitude is conformity with duty in concrete circumstances (where duty is presumably supplied by ethical life). 150

Rectitude can be aligned with virtue. However, Hegel seems to complain, morality does not see rectitude as truly moral. This is because rectitude is in fact ubiquitous. But morality—a moral law disconnected from ethical life—always looks for exceptional circumstances, for clashes of duties, for artificial and fanciful scenarios. Now these scenarios are exactly the domain of conscience, of individual moral judgement. And as we saw (Handout 13), these scenarios occur typically under the conditions of a weakening social life. Where institutions can no longer claim authority, or where they do not even exist (‘uncivilised’ societies), there are no standards left other than conscience. 150R

Since the doctrine of virtues ethics is thus grounded in ethical life, it follows that it cannot be discussed separately from the historical conditions. In this sense it becomes a history of spirit, that is, a history of freedom’s actualisation (in the sense above). 150R

VIRTUE AND HABIT. Hegel seems to endorse two Aristotelian claims about virtue. First, virtue applies to particular individuals in particular circumstances. Therefore, it is bound to be somewhat indeterminate, based on the principle ‘more or less’. Second, a man is virtuous only when he has a virtuous character. That is, he must display it regularly, and it must become his own characteristic. (I do not pretend to understand what Hegel means by contrasting the 150R 150A

Germans and the French. The Germans are said to be more 'thoughtful', so anyway it's all good.)

Constancy of character amounts to habit. And that is how Aristotle understood it too: a good man will make ethical acts his habit. Hegel has some interesting glosses on this. First, in making virtue a habit the internal struggle of the individual ceases. Habit is a theoretical, as much as a practical, good. Theoretical thinking too demands habit of clarity. Second, however, habit has a sinister side. When you become too familiar with your ways of life or your ways of thinking, when you feel too 'at home', when you run on auto-pilot, then this is a state of spiritual death. (Bizarrely, though also predictably, Hegel makes the same case for physical death, but we need not follow him there.)

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OBJECTIVE ETHICAL ORDER. Individuals only actualise their freedom in ethical life. This is a re-statement of the criticism of Kant we saw earlier. Unless an individual is a part of this objective order, he does not know which behaviour even to test. But there is another sense of it—that individuals, for their ethical fulfilment, must be part of a *good* order. For otherwise, we might say, they will be able to begin, but they will never finish.

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